

Arden

Volume VII
Spring 2005

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*This issue of Arden is dedicated to
Dr. Joseph Francavilla,
for his many years of loyalty, support,
and contribution to the journal.*

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Painting a Red Picture

Emily Stranger

My hands confess that passions are burning
when choosing pigments of carnal casts.
These virgin hands are innocent and learning
and trying to create an illusion that lasts.
And when I lay down the brushes to hover
and caress this canvas with my bare hands,
I stroke the coarse cloth like my lover
and euphorically fulfill all his demands.

A Father Surveys His Land

Brian B. Johnson

I traveled down the piece of land and set
A mark for every tree that had holes through
The middle. Straight and simple are the centers
Of trees when viewed at eye-level and filled with air.

(George has to leave for want of more to live,
His reason being that he is unwanted.

Jolie takes things, things that she wants, to fill
Out her past-life, one that is to this point
Empty, and theft can mean so much to some.

Andrew also wants things, but from just one
Person. He saves up all of the courage
He owns and prepares to spend it all.
He uses it and falls dramatically.)

On trail, I also set to life
A vine-infested sapling that had tried hard

To survive and I saved it, I remade it.
I pulled away the chains and lifted it
Up off the ground to wave at me, up from
The leaves, the community that comforted
The small thing by surrounding it with friends
And killing it. But I saved it, I re-
Created it and now, now it was mine.
I could take it, I could break it, and I
Could light it up with flame to destroy it.
Or I could exalt it and lift it up
All the way out of my own field of sight,
And make it my gift to all the world.

But I know that I will leave it out here
Where I know that it wants to be, because
I only made it, I do not own it.

(I haven't seen George in forever and I
Don't know if I ever will again.

Jolie is now in prison and I feel
That maybe I could have somehow stopped it.

Andrew committed suicide one night
While I was in the other room distracted).

My tree has died, my creation unmade,
And all the holes seem so much more complex.

Suicide as Therapy

Dennis Tricoche

I stand.

Forty-eight stories above, all the bustling below; my hair, my life and my failures blowing in the wind, and the view is beautiful. From here I'm given the kind of clarity hindsight is always too late in offering.

"What do you hope to accomplish with this, Mr. Smith?"

"Pain for others and none for me; I want my ex-wife to read my last thoughts as they dribble down the sewage drain; I want those below to know I was a man hurting."

"Dive off, Mr. Smith. Tell me why you are doing this, on the way down."

"Fair enough."

I dive.

Passing the 48th floor: six seconds remaining. The warm wind smacks me, I squint at the gust of caustic smog and my insides are being wrenched upwards: I couldn't have asked for more.

"Coming out of work one day, riding down the escalators to the

lobby floor, I passed the same flower stand I'd passed every other day. It stood at the curb facing the street with a tent covering and big wooden wheels like an old ice cream stand from the Depression era. That day there was someone new manning the stand, a tall slender gorgeous foreign girl; she looked like so many happy immigrants you see in old photographs with cosmetic gratitude painted all over their faces—you see, I noticed these things about people, I noticed when they needed help. So I introduce myself: Hi, my name is Michael and I'll buy two dozen roses. And then, like the mid-level schmuck I am, I tell her: They're for you. And she smiles, showing some slightly crooked teeth; she cocks her head to the right a little, looks down fiddling with the stems of the roses, and rocks side to side—yeah, I think that's the moment we fell in love."

"Your falling in love is irrelevant now, is it not? All that is left now is the falling."

"But she said she loved me. . . ."

"Go on, Mr. Smith."

I fall.

Passing the 32nd floor: four seconds remaining. Lonely and accelerating, I realize there may not be space enough for me to land.

"There were times I would stare at her from the hallway in our apartment, while she reorganized her book collection for the tenth time. She would stare at a book and then at the bookcases and then back at the book as she sat Indian-style on the floor petting our

Australian Shepherd; she was so gentle with the books, with the dog, with everything. We'd read together at the park lying on the warm grass, smile at each other and know. The year we spent together was, well, no there's no other way I can say it: shiny. My memories have, like, a glow around their rim; I don't even have memories of rain or illness or unhappiness; it all just gleams true. She told me every day that she loved me. I married her."

"What caused the marriage to end?"

"She left me. I came home one night, she wasn't there, I searched for her but then she never came back."

"Let us finish the story, Mr. Smith; we are running out of time."

I cry.

Passing the 16th floor: two seconds remaining. Below, I can see deep into people's eyes as they realize what they are watching will darken their lives and stir their memories into a bloody froth.

"It wasn't until I received a letter from her telling me to stop searching, that she'd only married me for her citizenship so she could bring her children down from wherever it was they were. I didn't see her again for a year. Until a few days ago, I see her at a coffee shop at the ground floor of this building, reading a book, as gentle and nice-looking as ever. She works there. I was outside, passing by, and I stood there staring at her through the window. She looked up and stared back at me, listless. For a good while I searched her green eyes and found nothing but my own bitter reflection; that's when I

found this all to be a perfect exchange: a splash of fresh red grief for the shit she gave me."

"Pero cae la hora de la venganza, y te amo.' Is that not right?"

"That's right, that's what I've been saying."

"But will you ever be able to love her or even celebrate her pain?"

The wind shushes me. I see her face on all the terrified bodies beneath me. I turn my body to look at the sky one last time; the clouds a puffy white like scoops of vanilla . . . ice cream.

Pilgrim in Ulster

Daniel Ross

I traveled here in search of your origins
Thinking, could this really be a poet's land?
You tilled these fields with your father by hand,
Surrounded by marshes, farmlands, and fens.
No one could possibly drown in Lough Beg,
Where Yeatsian swans float with majestic ease.
Church Ireland's thin spire rise through the reeds.
You and your father dug peat from this bog.

We wonder from what sources does a poet grow,
What fosters that love of strange word and sound,
To create rhythm and rhyme and to bestow
On a language not yours a beauty profound.
You saw past the tragedy of bombs and blows.
Your verse has made this a holy ground.

Elephants Dance

Obadiah Booker

Elephants dance in sweet but wild lines,
And stumble after hearts with swift steps.
To music, to imagination, to innocent sex,
To hope. Big, lumbering legs, entwined
With the essence of being understood,
These pachyderms mamba to the heartbeats
Of girls who would mock their hearts and beat
Them for giving them a fat-eyed-look.
The dancing giants stay in motion,
But move from sweet subtlety to drab
Archaic descent, fallen. Their hide-thick skin crumbles
Like sun-scorched earth, burnt, and cracked.
And pulling themselves up, with Cedar like spines
Elephants continue to dance in sweet but wild lines.

Ask Jeeves: "How to Find the Perfect Mate"

Melissa McDaniel

While driving home from work tonight after another long, unproductive day of sitting in a five-by-five cubicle, typing listlessly on my Dell Pentium Four Processor, I think about surfing. I'm not talking about feeling the waves in my hair off the coast of Florida. I'm talking about Internet surfing. The Internet—that 21st century sanctuary! All day I have been watching the minute hand circle the clock eight times in order to punch my time card and escape into the land of virtual entertainment. We're in the Internet Age now. We no longer need to rely on small town paper boys throwing our newspapers into the puddle outside our front doors. With the simple click of the mouse, I can become immersed in all of the important news of the day: developments in the War on Terrorism; the disastrous effects of Hurricanes Charlie, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne; and Britney Spears' recent marriage and annulment. That's it: breaking world news in seconds!

But as I Google: "Nickelback's recent album" and Ask Jeeves: "How To Find the Perfect Mate," I suddenly get bombarded with pop-ups. Instantly, ten windows invade my space to inform me on the latest dating services. I quickly learn that with a proper name and a correct

email address, I can find Mr. Right in seconds. In this world of buying and selling, who would have thought that I could trade my personal information over the internet for a chance to meet a statistically and perfectly matched mate?

In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, isn't it nice to cozy up into that great leather desk chair and enter AOL's dating chatroom so that suiteP30 can get to know fishinfool34? Then, maybe after a few minutes, suiteP30 will gain enough courage to invite fishinfool34 to a more intimate environment—a private chatroom. Twenty years ago, a private "chat room" was the empty janitor closet where Steven Danby and Laurie Lee would go in between those ominous high school tardy bells. Now we can have virtual dates with the loverboy20s and hotchick14s in a simulated, practically anonymous environment. Yes, Bill Gates has helped initiate a world-wide revolution. I wonder if he used the Internet to find his wife, Melinda. Was he a member of that immense online dating database?

In today's demand-driven society, we choose our mates like shopping for a car. Newspaper want ads and Internet pop-ups read: "Single female looking for loving, financially set 30-year-old male" or "Recently divorced male needs a caring, dependent woman, 20 years of age." As I was driving on Manchester Expressway the other day thinking about those perfect black stiletto heels that I found on sale at Dillard's the day before, I came across a Bill Heard Chevrolet Billboard: "Recently owned Chevrolet Cavalier for sale. Dependable, financially capable drivers needed. Must be 20 years of age." Dating

today has become a superficial, "all you can get for the best price" endeavor. It's like the buffet line at China Moon. A scoop of sweet and sour chicken here and an egg roll there to compile your perfect plate. Likewise, a great body here and a "bring home to Mom and Dad" personality there create your perfect mate. We choose our mates by making checklists:

- Styled hair
- Slim figure
- Nice derrière

And what happens when all the checks add up? "DING, DING, DING. We have a winner! What have we got for him, Johnny?" A nice, shiny, new . . . date!

For centuries, across nearly every continent, different cultures have expressed their own, distinct dating traditions. In the 18th century, agricultural farmers participated in certain societal traditions when marrying off their daughters. The bride's family would pay a dowry to the groom's family and the marital bond would be set. For the Bushman living in the Kalahari Desert, the dating experience is pretty much summed up by the bridewealth of young girls; that is, the groom's family gives an amount of their property to the bride's family as recompense. The marriages are arranged and the property value is accepted. And what of arranged marriages where no dating even occurs? Instead, the bride is walking towards her intended—a man she's never seen before. Can you imagine? The only exchanges made by today's young daters are questions geared at tallying up the other's

attractive qualities. It makes you wonder what kind of society we would be in if our dating choices were limited to our fathers' wishes and which suitor offered the largest bridewealth. We would all be dating sweater vest-wearing doctors who earned their degrees from Emory and offered their first year's salary as a neurological surgeon for your father's bridewealth price. Forget about that leather vest-wearing, Harley Davidson-riding stud you've dreamt about since your youthful days!

Last week, while I was talking with a man at my office, I noticed that he was nervously stumbling over his words and fumbling his thumbs as he finally asked those eight immortal words, "Do you want to go out some time?" I thought, "Why not? He's got the things I'm looking for—nice hair, good teeth, a great personality." So, Geoff and I went to dinner at Café Intermezzo and had a nice chat.

Geoff: Hi, how are you? Did you find the restaurant okay?

Melissa: Yes. I'm fine. It was just like you said, right off of 85.

Geoff: Shall we sit?

Melissa: Sure. Is this fine?

As we sat down, the interview began.

Geoff: So, how do you like working at Total Systems?

Melissa: It's good. I enjoy the atmosphere and the people. How do you like it? What department are you in?

Geoff: Claims management. It's fine. A lot of busy work though. . . So tell me about yourself. Where are you from? Do you have any siblings?

Melissa: I'm from Dallas, Texas. I have three sisters, one of whom is my twin.

Geoff: Oh wow! Are you identical?

Melissa: No, we're fraternal.

Shall I go on? For single Americans living in a country where dating services are popping up on our computer monitors every thirty seconds, dating is an interview. He asks you a question, you answer it, and then you proceed to ask him a question. And after a fine salmon entrée and a slice of that delectable tres leches cake, you sip the last swig of your bitter coffee and go home wondering if you "got the job."

Yes, times have changed. Long gone are those days when girls fell in love with the boy next door and when friendship came much easier than dating. Now, instead of spending hours picking out the right outfit for your first date with the "Mr. Right" who was chosen for you on www.perfectmatch.com for the price of \$29.95, you find yourself poring over your desk, creating questions for the "big interview" with your perfect mate. Instead of meticulously picking that perfect shade of Revlon lipstick, you frantically shove a pen and a journalist's notebook down into your purse to get ready and prepare for your test. And as you're driving down the interstate rehearsing the first words you're going to say and the first questions you're going to ask when you finally get to meet your perfect match, all you need to think about are those vital interview tips your college speech professor ingrained into your head: eye contact, thumb-to-thumb firm handshake, and confidence. And after a nice informative dinner, you can

grade his responses and decide whether or not he passed the test and if, in fact, he is the perfect match worth your \$29.95.

And who said dating was complicated?

The Walk

Jake Patrick

I saw unruly cigarette butts drying
her spit in a comforting plant pot.
They enjoyed a sagging, tree-shaded bench
in the grass.

I walked the familiar concrete-squared path
away from the spot with the signs,
Thank You For Not Smoking,
bench yearning.

PLEASE USE WALKWAYS

So I spit
a brown coffee mucous snicker
at the walk.

I don't know how this girl
got to her bench.
There was the grass

between us.

Her persuading smoke
debauched across the walk.
I dallied and worried at
those damned signs.

I quit.

One gorgeous depraved habit
lamented and remembered, curling lascivious
in her hair.

Her smoking mouth told me
I loved her without asking.
Romantic carnal intuitive lips told me
You Wanna.

Yes. The grass—only one step off
in the right direction. It's all there,
my heart's poem-told habits,
THE REAL ME.

I can allow
life's lesser rebellions:

caffeine, nicotine, love—dissident grass stepping—Freedom Here.

Though first, this naive coffee cup and
a constricted-circle trash bin, a little along
the walk. A tiny allowance. I can deal. I'm
used to it.

Digression is the way, the trick,
and on the walk there's a guardian of old—Romance
screams,
This Cop, This Tyrant, This The Man
stands blocking destiny, a bench!
And I acquiesce—shameful familiar comfort
Confusion.

*Golden Rods*Deborah Tainsh

Yesterday, the morning dew sparkled like
Citron on the yellow blanket of
Golden rods
Covering a million dollar stage.

And with a final blessing
The sun veiled the wild autumn garden
Mingled in broom sage, Queen Anne's
White lace and pine green in the backdrop.

The sight would have prompted Van Gogh
To lift his brushes.
But in his absence
I took a snapshot to remember
The space filled by winds and birds,

Placed it in a plastic cover
To remember the way the golden heads

Reflected morning light,
Made me wish I were a painter in its midst
Before today
When the earth hemorrhaged
Beneath iron teeth, claws digging
Deep into layers
Ripping away roots
Because the progress argument
That age old mantra,
Manifest Destiny,
Buries another brilliant autumn.

*there are no poets anymore*Joseph Francavilla

there are no poets anymore
they have gone to La-la land,
hyping special effects and Botox dreams
beauty comes in computer graphics and syringes now
revisions are DVD outtakes, directors' cuts, and remakes
and this year's tight-skinned new you
there are no poets anymore
they've fled to Wall Street, getting and spending,
hawking SUVs and lite beer
with potent, indecipherable slogans
always comforting, yet less filling
their bottom lines are certainly not
the couplet at sonnet's end
but, uncoupled, the end of sonnets

Synchronicity

Amber Floyd

"Oh my God, George—this view is amazing!"

Her voice caught on the breeze and swirled around him. Smiling fondly at the top of her head, he caught her hand as it rested upon the guardrail and pointed to the left.

"I know. Look at those waves crashing against the rocks down there. I can smell the spray from here."

"How far up would you say we are?" she asked, turning her head to catch his gaze.

"Oh . . . I'd say at least, what, 300 feet?" He braced his arms against the guardrail and leaned forward to gaze out at the horizon, watching the sunset gild the water below.

"We used to go cliff-diving back home. I've jumped at least half this distance before," she said with a small smile. Raising an eyebrow, she issued him a silent challenge.

"Oh, no, Shirl-girl! Even if we cleared those rocks, the impact from hitting the water'd break bones." Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her into an easy embrace. Sporting a flirtatious grin, he finished, "And I like your body the way it is now . . . rubbing against me,

all in one piece."

Rolling her eyes, she playfully swatted at his shoulder. "Pervert," she accused, the breathy word sounding more like an endearment than an insult.

Laughing hard against the wind, he swatted her on the behind before jumping back to fend off her outraged attack. Catching her hands by the wrists before they could make contact with his chest, he taunted, "Ah, come on, Shirley! Don't act like you don't LOVE it."

Scoffing, Shirley struggled briefly before tossing her head in disgust. Leaning her hip heavily against the guardrail, she awkwardly crossed her arms across her chest and looked away from him in a huff.

"Ah, come on, Shirl. The day's too pretty to waste on a sulk."

Turning her head to glance over her shoulder, Shirley caught a glimpse of George's expression—the liquid-brown eyes framed by pathetically drawn eyebrows and a playful pout—and laughed.

"Ugh! Sometimes I really hate you, George," she said, relaxing against him.

"I know," he said, turning her to face the horizon. "But seriously, isn't this place great?"

Shirley glanced around at the craggy walls of the promontory, watching the water and sky darken until the horizon faded, leaving only a dual reflection of twilight-purple heavens and scintillating stars, and sighed softly.

"Yes, this place is great, George."

He braced his arms on the guardrail, bracketing them around her

body, and inhaled deeply.

"I can't picture anything better than this. I could stay here with you forever."

He jumped as he felt her snort indelicately at his words. When the snort turned into full-fledged giggling, he poked her in the side.

"What?" he demanded defensively.

Turning in his arms to face him, Shirley smiled, her thumbs drawing lazy circles on the sensitive skin of his forearms.

"Forever, George? Come on! It's a well-known fact that women outlive men. Do you really expect me to spend the latter years of my life with a corpse?"

"Well," he began with a cheeky grin, "if you loved me. . . ."

"What? I'd linger a while with your maggoty ass?" She raised an eyebrow at him, a wry smile curling her lips. "Dream on, sweetie."

"All I'm saying is, what's a little putrefied flesh between friends?"

"Eeeeewww!" she squealed, twisting in his arms. Laughing softly, she replied, "Enough of this nasty talk! Let's get back to the part where you were worshipping my body and swearing your undying love and devotion to me."

Pulling back, George raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Did I say that?"

Cocking her head to the side, she had the grace to blush as she answered.

"Well . . . no. Not yet."

"Hmm, not yet?" he prompted.

Rolling her eyes, she finished. "No, not yet, but I can wait." "Oh yeah?" he replied. "Any time limit on that?"

* * *

"I don't know, George, you tell me. Was it really so hard to agree to a vacation?"

Shirley glanced over at the man in the passenger seat leaning his face against the window and staring silently at the night-enshrouded countryside outside the car. Seven years had wrought subtle changes in his appearance, creating frown lines between his eyebrows, thinner lips that seemed to be twisted in a constant grimace, and a soft layer of cuddle-pudge around his lower belly. Her own body had betrayed her, padding her thighs and rear with an uncomfortable amount of cellulite even as her hair grew brittle and breasts began to droop. Their relationship had evolved into a lackluster affair as well. At one time, Shirley had thought that they were on the cusp of marriage, but the proposal she had anticipated never materialized. They had spent the past four years drifting apart from one another, but Shirley continued to hold on, fighting daily to preserve their relationship. But her efforts were often rebuked as being too clingy, and she often felt like she was all alone in the relationship.

"George? Are you just going to sit there and sulk?" She sighed as she received no response. "Fine then, give me the silent treatment.

I'll just listen to the radio."

Leaning forward, she turned the radio on and scanned for a good station. Readjusting her seatbelt to lie across her shoulder, rather than her neck, Shirley hummed along with the song, pointedly ignoring her cold-hearted lover. She couldn't help but recall the argument that had led to his chilly demeanor.

* * *

"What the hell are these, Shirl?"

Shirley looked up to see George standing above her, tossing a handful of glossy brochures into her face.

"What are you talking about? These are the vacation brochures I was telling you about last night."

"God damn it, Shirley. It's like you only hear what you want. I've told you four times already that I do not want to go on a fucking road trip!"

Shirley sat, shaking in the shadow he cast over her. Clenching her jaw as her hands slowly curled into fists, she fought to control her own anger before responding.

"Don't yell at me," she answered calmly.

Raising her eyes, she watched him fling his briefcase onto the couch, loosening his tie with one hand as he sank onto the ottoman.

"I'm not yelling," he amended. "I'm just frustrated. It's like you have no concept of the work I do. I have a lot of responsibilities that

require my full attention, you know, and yet you act like the only thing I have to worry about is whether you're happy."

"I don't believe you!" she exclaimed, her temper flaring. "You act like you're the only person who works in this relationship. Well, here's a news flash: if you recall correctly, I'm the major breadwinner in this house, not you. Apparently, I'm the only one who cares about where this relationship is going as well."

"And, what? You think a vacation is gonna solve all of our problems?"

His agitated fingers pulled his shirttails from his pants and made short work of the long row of buttons that ran down his chest. She watched his movements and tried to answer carefully.

"I just think it would be nice to get away for a little while, to spend some time together, alone, like we used to."

"God, Shirley. We live together, we eat together, we sleep together; hell, sometimes I think that if I asked the shower curtain to pass me the toilet paper, your hand would creep out to pass me a roll. We spend nearly every moment together, waking or otherwise. The only time we're NOT together, ALONE, is when we go to work!"

"That's not true! You can't count that time. Being in a room with someone you never speak to, except to ask them to pass you the remote or a beer, is not the same as spending time together. Don't you want this relationship to work?" she demanded, scooting forward in her chair to touch his knee. Taking a deep breath, she continued

softly. "Don't you love me anymore?"

Flinging her hand off of his knee with a fierce hand, George nearly exploded in anger.

"Stop SMOTHERING me!"

* * *

It had taken the rest of the evening to pacify him, but, even then, Shirley couldn't let go of her idea. By the middle of the night, she finally coerced him into the car and the road trip. Now she was speeding along Highway 10, hoping to reach the Cape by morning. She glanced again at the man who sat, peevishly silent, beside her. He still refused to look at her and she sighed. Turning her eyes back to the road, she stifled a yawn with her hand, and noticed that the tank was dangerously close to empty. Spotting the next exit, she veered off of the highway and turned into the parking lot of the nearest gas station. Pulling up to a pump, Shirley reached between their seats to pull out her purse. Rifling through the tiny, black leather bag, she shifted in her seat to talk to George.

"I'm going to go ahead and get some coffee while I'm here. Do you want anything, George?" she asked, looking up from her gaping purse. Not receiving an immediate response, she repeated herself.

"George? George! Fine, I'll just surprise you then."

Slamming her door, she walked around the car to pump her gas, and then headed into the store for a liquid pick-me-up.

She pushed the door open with one hand and quickly scanned the contents of the room as the bell chimed melodically above her head. Her gaze swept along racks of cookies, potato chips and candy to the coolers at the back of the room where she finally noted a small neon sign which advertised, "Hot Dogs, Coffee, and Chili." Crisscrossing through the aisles to the back of the room, Shirley almost tripped over a tiny middle-aged woman as she exited the bathroom.

"Oh! Excuse me, sweetie!" the woman sputtered, patting Shirley on the arm with a nervous hand. Pointing towards the coffee with her chin, she smiled. "Looks like we had the same idea."

Returning her smile with a short laugh, Shirley replied, "Yes. At this time of night, everybody needs coffee."

Nodding, the other woman followed Shirley past the hot dog and chili cookers to the coffee machine. Reaching for a large coffee cup, Shirley looked out the window at her car. She moved from side to side, but found that the gas pump blocked her view.

"So," she asked the woman waiting patiently beside her, "are you on a road trip, too?"

"Lord, yes!" the woman exclaimed, holding her cup to her chest. "My family and I are on our way to visit my parents. We've got another four hours to go, so my husband and I are taking a break to stretch and refuel."

"On coffee and gas, right? Yeah, my boyfriend and I are doing the same," Shirley responded, filling another large cup with the steamy brew.

"Yeah? My husband's over there by the doughnuts. Is your guy still out in the car?"

"Yeah, and still sulking I'm sure." She met the woman's gaze with an apologetic smile. "I sorta forced him into coming."

"Oh?" the woman inquired. Glancing at her husband quickly before sidling up next to Shirley, the woman murmured, "Introducing him to the family?"

Laughing, Shirley shook her head. "I wish! No, we're on vacation. It's been a while since we spent any quality time together so. . . ."

The woman nodded knowingly. "Work . . . or another woman?"

Shirley furrowed her brow in confusion. "What?" she asked.

"Your guy," the woman prompted, "which has he been preoccupied with—his job or another woman?"

"Neither," Shirley answered quickly. Watching the woman begin to fill her cup with coffee, she found herself fiddling with the lid of her own cup. Shifting from one foot to the other she amended, "Well . . . work, I guess. If he cheated, I never knew about it."

The woman moved to add several packets of sugar to her brew. "And how long have you been together?"

"Seven years," Shirley answered, tapping her fingers on the counter. She watched as the other woman exhaled sharply, shaking her head sadly.

"Sounds like the classic seven year itch, sweetie." She glanced over her shoulder, monitoring her husband, before leaning closer. "He'll either get over it, or start cheating next. Have you thought about

whether it's really worth it?"

"What?"

"Trying so hard, for one," the woman answered. "Are you sticking with him because you love him, or because you're afraid of being alone?"

Lowering her eyes, Shirley bit her lower lip. "A little bit of both, I guess." Sighing harshly, she continued, "I'm just so tired of feeling like I'm the only one who's still in this, you know?"

The woman grimaced in acknowledgement. "Kids?"

"Oh, no . . . none," Shirley answered.

"Well, that's good," the woman responded. "If I were you, I'd start considering other options. Believe me when I say, you don't want to wind up staying with Mr. Wrong for the kids' sake."

"Laura!" Her husband called from the register. "What, are you grinding the beans over there? Get your coffee and let's go!"

Shirley and Laura watched as he walked out of the store with a package of doughnuts tucked under his arm. Sighing, Laura collected her coffee and a handful of creamers. Pausing for a moment, she met Shirley's gaze with a small smile.

"Get out while you still can, sweetie. You drive safe now, all right?"

"Yeah, you too, Laura," Shirley responded.

She lingered for a moment by the coffee machine, watching Laura walk out to the Astro van parked at the front of the store. As she watched the van exit the station, she sighed slowly. Collecting her two cups of coffee, she walked up to the register and paid her bill.

Backing out of the door, she made her way to the car with a cup in each hand. Balancing them awkwardly in one hand, she reached down to open her car door. Easing into the car, she gingerly placed the steaming cups into the awaiting cup-holders.

"I got you coffee . . . two sugars and one creamer, just the way you like it."

Glancing at George, she noted his lolling head and sighed to herself. Settling into her seat before taking a long, slow sip from her coffee, Shirley wished that for once she could laze around rather than drive. Shaking her head to herself, she started the car and made her way back to the highway. Glancing at the posted signs, she sighed in relief as she realized that the Cape was only an hour away.

By the time she reached the exit, she had finished her coffee and was contemplating sneaking some from George's cup. Looking over at his still form, she opted against it, deciding that she could wait to share it with him once they reached the promontory. Soon her headlights were picking out the short, twisted gray body of the overlook's guardrail, and she slowed the car to park in front of it. Letting the engine idle for a moment, she looked out across the water as the sky lightened, growing pink and orange as the sun began to creep out from beneath the water-logged depths of the horizon.

Cutting the engine, she exited the car to stretch her arms over her head. Twisting her body from side to side, she attempted to work the creeping soreness from her muscles as she watched the dawn break more broadly across the sky. Leaving the car door open, she walked

up to the guardrail, inhaling deeply as the scent of the salty ocean spray wafted towards her. Bracing her hands on the guardrail, the early morning wind tossed her hair carelessly about her face and Shirley reflected on the past seven years that had led her back to this point. Closing her eyes against the breeze, she lost herself in the memory.

"Yes," she whispered aloud, "this place is great, George."

He braced his arms on the guardrail, bracketing them around her body, and inhaled deeply.

"I can't picture anything better than this. I could stay here with you forever."

But could she continue to stay with George? Laura had made quite an impression on Shirley, with her tired eyes and rueful smile. Only 24 hours before, she would have refused to consider such an option. How could she leave him when she still loved him so violently? But after six hours of silence, she accepted the fact that, at some point, George's heart had stopped beating for her. Bringing him back to this spot wasn't going to change that.

Opening her eyes slowly, she turned back towards the car, watching as the morning light bathed its metallic body in mild radiance. Moving silently towards the passenger side of the car, Shirley continued to reflect on George's words.

"All I'm saying is, what's a little putrefied flesh between friends?"

Stopping before his door, Shirley crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the face pressed snugly against the glass.

George's forehead was marred by a dark red port wine stain where it pressed against the glass, a sign of lividity. His eyelids drooped over glassy eyes whose white sclera contrasted sharply among the red evidence of numerous hemorrhaged capillaries. His expression, the product of a vacant stare and grimacing jaw, which was locked firmly in the first stage of rigor mortis, seemed dismissive in the glare of the morning sun, and Shirley absently tapped her fingers against the glass, trying to catch George's wandering attention.

"George?" She called, laying her palm flat against the glass.
"George, wake up. We're here."

Opening the door, Shirley caught him as he slid from the car, barely restrained by the seatbelt that crossed his chest and lap. Huffing slightly, she reached into the car to disengage the seatbelt, and barely managed to keep him in the car. Slowly, he slumped, resting his head against her shoulder. Ruffling his hair with her fingers, Shirley whispered, "Come on, George. Time to get up, sweetie."

She knelt beside the car, holding him in her arms for a few moments. Resting her cheek against the top of his head, she exhaled slowly, hugging him closer to her.

"You're right, George. I am guilty of smothering you, but I met a woman tonight who gave me a new perspective on things."

Stroking his face with one hand, Shirley felt tears brimming in her eyes as she tried to explain.

"We haven't been in synch with one another for a while now. You know that best, I think. And, while a part of me will always love you,

will always be waiting for you to say those words, I'm now prepared to let you go."

Pressing a kiss to the top of his head, she hugged him one last time.

"You once told me that you could spend forever in this place, and I want that for you. So, I need for you to get up now, sweetie."

She waited for a second before tugging lightly on his shoulders. He slumped out of the door, nearly falling to the ground, but Shirley caught him with straining hands and lowered him to the ground on his back. Cocking her head to the side, she looked down at his immobile face. Sighing shortly, she scooped her hands beneath his armpits and tugged.

"Well . . . I've been carrying you for the past seven years. I suppose twelve more feet won't make that much of a difference."

Moving backwards, she dragged him over the asphalt until she felt the guardrail press against her rear. Hefting him higher in her arms, she turned their bodies until he was propped over the guardrail. Pausing to catch her breath, she stroked his back.

"I know—it's hard to move on. It's hard for me as well, but this really is for the best. You know, I'll always remember you fondly, George. And we'll always have the Cape."

Standing, she positioned herself behind him. Lifting with her legs, she managed to force him over the side of the guardrail with two heartfelt pushes. Wiping her hand across her forehead, Shirley looked out at the early morning light. The water rippled against the

horizon with gilded waves, and the sky highlighted the granite-colored walls of the promontory surrounding her. Inhaling deeply, she admired the synchronicity of the waves as they carried the current out to sea. She leaned forward, bracing her elbows on the guardrail, and smiled at the harmony of nature, the marriage of water, stone, and air.

“Yes,” she breathed softly, whispering to the wind. “This place is great, George.”

Splash

Terri Kimble



Colorful Insanity

Emily Stranger

What is this colorful denouement,
A concoction of Acrylic Polymer Emulsion
Reflecting some distant tragedy
with a script and story that only
plastic colors could stage?

Tell me, Jackson Pollock, what insanity
of highly refined Linseed oil tainting
Alizarin crimson and Flesh yellow
drives your sticks, trowels and knives?
All dripping. Fluid paints or heavy impastos
with sand, broken glass, and other foreign matter.
What is this convergence of color and madness?

The Blissful Marriage of Peggy Peters

Kathy L. Honea

*Familiar things happen, and mankind
does not bother about them. It requires
a very unusual mind to undertake the
analysis of the obvious.*

-Alfred North Whitehead

Sitting there with a shit-eating grin,
he believes he loves me.

"Make me something to eat."

I burn his chicken to a crisp.

"Get me a beer."

I piss in it with a smile .

"Let's fool around baby."

I hit him over the head

And hope the Bastard drops dead.

The Only Thing in the World

Nick Norwood

I rode in the back seat and gazed out the window to keep my mind off Tommy's driving. Up front, riding shotgun, Richie was busy rolling a joint. He had a little pile of crumbled weed in a Frisbee on his lap. He hunched over it, bobbing his head to Frank Zappa's *Sheik Yerbouti*. We were on Highway 37, which runs north across the river into Oklahoma, then cuts due east toward Idabel. It's kind of a dangerous road because you can't see far ahead of you, a windy two-laner. Right on the edge of the piney woods, curving and dipping, it disappears into the trees. Our big plan, the grand scheme, was to stop at the first liquor store on the Oklahoma side of the river, get some beer, cruise around for awhile while we drank it, then start hitting the bars and dance clubs on the strip. Main Street, Idabel, Oklahoma. If we were lucky we'd see some action. A fistfight perhaps. A drunken melee. It was part of my family's lore that my parents had seen one once, in a beer joint on the outskirts of town. A guy heard his ex-wife was in there dancing with some dude and came in firing his pistol. Shots rang out, as they say. *Bang bang. Boom. Pow.* People running for the door. It made for a good story. I needed a good story,

having come from a boring little used-up town like Clarksville, Texas. Boring. I was just killing time before I graduated from high school and went off to college. Did I mention it was boring? My parents, at that particular moment, thought we were going on an overnight camping trip. They didn't ask why we were going in Tommy's Firebird. Parents.

So we had no reason to hurry, but Tommy kept the traffic behind us, kept racing right up to the bumper of the next car in front, hanging just off its left flank, swinging into the on-coming lane, around, back in, stamping that big-block V8, rattling the pipes. Then a pick-up or semi would rip by going the other way and I'd know how close we'd come to getting pasted.

Fuck, I'd think. But, hey, spending my Saturday nights in the living room watching television was another kind of death. A guy's got to accept some risk.

We raced along, the gray airy sky hanging over us like a partly erased chalkboard, a short break between spring storms. The ground was already soaked, and in the black gummy cotton fields water stood between the rows like strips of plate glass. More rain was coming. When the thick wall of trees alongside the road broke and the sky opened over a cow pasture you could see a thunderhead boiling toward us out of the west, rolling over the treetops.

We barrelled onto the old concrete-railed Red River bridge at about 75. I was looking out the window on my side of the car, the passenger side. Just then, I saw a pair of white egrets flying up the river chan-

nel, as if they'd emerged from under the bridge, pumping their lanky wings in unison, cruising side-by-side about ten feet over the water. Richie had turned that direction, too, as he brought the joint to his mouth to lick the paper, and out of the corner of my eye I could see he was also watching those two birds, stark white against the dull reddish brown of the river. Your eye was just drawn to them. Beautiful. An absolutely beautiful sight like you're not used to seeing in that part of the world.

Then, suddenly, as we reached the end of the bridge, Tommy jerked us back to reality. *Whaaaaaa!* He slung the car off the road, onto the gravel shoulder, then hooked it around in a squall of tires and floored it going back the other way. Richie and I turned to look at him and I think Richie might have yelled something like, "What the fuck?" But Tommy didn't answer, just kept his eyes straight ahead, his foot on the accelerator. And then I looked out the window at the opposite side of the bridge, and right away you could see that something had happened. Down on the bank, in a place where fishermen put their flatbottoms in the water, a group of people were milling around the sheriff's cruiser. I knew what Tommy was thinking, what this might be about, because the river itself was as notorious as Idabel. It was a good river to drown in was the way people thought of it. Whirlpools. Suck holes.

Richie and I sat forward on our seats, looking down at the scene on the bank as we charged back across the bridge. After the heavy rain-

fall the river was up, seething and churning. Water puddles spotted the muddy bank and it was streaked with fresh tire ruts from the fishermen's pickups and boat trailers. The fishermen themselves wore rubber boots and bright slickers or plastic bib overalls so that it was a big jumble of neon orange and olive drab down there. They were stirred up over something. The closer we got the more you could tell it. We were already looking for a body, and although we couldn't see one yet, there was a blue tarp on the ground near where the people stood and a weird feeling in the air, even in Tommy's car. Richie punched the tape out, killed the music, and all you could hear then was the deep, sucking sound of that Firebird's big carburetor.

We parked at the end of the bridge, jumped out, and started walking down the sloping mud road that led to the bank when we met a fisherman trudging up the hill. Big guy, all his weight in his upper body, with a wiry, reddish-colored beard, a tackle box and a pair of fishing rods in one hand and an aluminum fish bucket in the other.

"What happened?" Tommy asked him.

The fisherman nodded toward the river. "Drowned," he said. Matter of fact. Almost like he was disgusted having to report it. *Another fucking idiot. Some damn fool.*

"Let me guess," Richie said. "He got sucked in a whirlpool."

"Yep." The guy nodded, stopped walking. "Not twenty minutes ago. Two of 'em." He turned part way toward the water, lifted the minnow bucket enough to point upriver, where you could see a home-made quilt spread out on the mud bank, beside a little scrubby willow

tree. A pitiful looking scene. Tawdry.

And the story itself. The guy was fishing in a flatbottom while his wife—or girlfriend or whatever; the fisherman wasn't sure, didn't care—lay on her quilt on the bank. Reading, the fisherman said, as odd as that sounds. Then there was a commotion, hollering, and everyone around looked up to see that the guy had drifted into a giant whirlpool, his boat keeled over, he fell in. And then this shocking development: the woman slung off the bank after him. She jumped in.

"I guess she thought she was going to save him," the fisherman said, shaking his head, disgusted.

They got the two of them out by dragging for them with snag lines. Too late, though. Their bodies were under the blue tarp.

We stood silently listening to this, and then all three of us, at once, looked past the fisherman and past the group huddled around the sheriff, eight or ten people in all, to the tarp on the ground. It was just one of those cheap discount-store tarps, something you'd tie down over a load in the back of a pickup to keep it out of the rain.

"They're waiting on the coroner right now," the fisherman said. He spat and started on his way, up the steep incline.

When we reached the other fishermen they were busy trading versions of the story. The sheriff stood in the middle of them, his khaki shirt straining at the buttons where it was pulled tight over his belly. He was smoking a cigarette—which he held down low, at arm's length—and rocking on his heels, listening politely, like he had heard

this kind of story before and knew the details weren't going to be that important. They drowned. End of story. Several of the fishermen, as they gave their versions, pointed to a spot on the river, made gestures with their hands. One of them raised an arm and did a little pirouette. I guess he was supposed to be imitating what a man looks like drowning in a whirlpool. I don't know. The whole group had its back to the tarp lying on the ground, but occasionally someone would glance at it, then look away. Just beyond it, the drowned fisherman's flatbottom lay upside-down on the bank, its small outboard motor resting neatly on top.

I had a hard time paying attention to what these guys were saying. It was more of the same. No new details, not significant ones anyway. I kept stealing glances at the tarp. It lay almost flat, a slight bulge in the middle. If you didn't know what was supposed to be under there, it could have been anything. Or could it? I thought about that. If you just happened on a tarp covering two dead bodies, would you know, would you have the same feeling in your gut I had right then looking at it and knowing what was underneath? You could just make out that there were two of them. The bulge had a sort of double hump. Almost indistinguishable. The tarp's blue nylon made a stark contrast against the dull reddish earth. It was frayed on one corner, showing that it had in fact been used for covering a load in a pickup, or something like that, its usual purpose.

And just after I noticed that last detail I felt my face go flush, all of

a sudden, a flash of heat. And then I thought for sure I was about to puke.

So I walked away, left Richie and Tommy there among the fishermen. I went down to the water's edge and stood there a minute until I had calmed myself enough to guarantee I wasn't going to toss cookies, watching the river flow past. It just kept sliding. Then I walked along the bank, upriver, with the water on my right and the current moving in the opposite direction. The river made a sort of sucking noise.

In a moment, without meaning to, I had reached the flowery quilt left there on the muddy ground by the woman who had just jumped in the river to try and save her man's life and had wound up drowning herself. There was a Schlitz styrofoam ice chest sitting on it, an open can of Pepsi, some pimento-cheese sandwiches in plastic wrap. And a paperback novel. The cover illustration showed a big-breasted woman in a low-cut dress being kissed on the neck by a long-haired, bare-chested young stud. I picked it up and started reading the last bent-back page, the page she had been on, I could tell, when she flung the book down to dive into the river. It was the middle of a sex scene. In the words of the book: "Roger pulled Melanie closer. She thrust her pelvis against his muscular thigh and ran one long fingernail over the deep cleft in his chin. 'Roger,' she said, 'This is it. You know it? This is the only thing worth caring about. This is the only thing in the world, Roger.' Roger moaned in her ear and nibbled briefly on her earlobe before running his tongue down her neck, slow-

ly lowering her to the bed."

I dropped the book on the quilt. Just let it sort of tumble out of my hands. Then I stood looking at it. Like I had been slugged in the head. Like that moment after you've been hit in the head and see stars before your eyes and the world is present all around you but you're not quite keeping up with it, you're a few rotations behind. And I was sick to my stomach again. I could feel it coming on like that thunderhead, which was suddenly right over the top of us. The sky got dark. Peels of thunder rolled down the river channel.

Just then Tommy yelled and I looked up to see that he had walked a little ways toward me along the riverbank. He motioned for me to come on, sort of with that same disgusted look on his face that the fisherman had when he told us the story. Bile shot into the back of my throat. A burning sensation, a taste like battery acid. I bent over and got ready to heave, and thought, *Oh, Melanie. Oh, Melanie.*

Blacklight Buddha
Jon Barwick



Glimpse of Dali
Christopher Ehrhart

Christ of St. John of the Cross

A hopeless land cowers below.
You hang there,
Christ-like.
Lice and filth reside in your hair.

Those outstretched arms
remind Us that
We have been in your place.
The pain seemed more genuine then.

It's you on that wooden apparatus.
You maintain a presence
so perfect,
so surreal.

Lost men seek salvation,

but your reticent tact
and frail loin cloth
frightens them.

Though your masterpiece lives,
it does not plead for souls.
It is muffled by an empty sepulcher
and the poiema that created you.

*The Hawk*Rachael Ray

My father brought the pigeon from work.
He'd bought it from a friend
Who had sold it, so small in its cage.
He had a place for it to go; he forced
The bird's wings against its body and flung
It inside the hawk's pen. A wild and desperate
Flutter took the bird to a perch.
My gaze moved to the hawk. I stared
At the small black holes it had for eyes.
I hated it. It cocked its head when it heard
My father's voice. He told me to go
Inside with Mother. I was too young,
Too delicate to see the pigeon's death.
I heard him laugh as I walked away
And thought about his gaping mouth,
Like a hyena screaming to scavenge a kill.

All night I heard the crickets sing,

And frogs that croaked to find a mate.
But never did I hear the pigeon.
My father rose before my mom or me.
I stayed in bed until he left for work,
Then I ran to see the small bird locked in death's
Eerie gaze, with the large, demonic one posing
Like a proud Gargoyle. Instead,
I saw the hawk. Its regal beak
Was open wide. Its hollow eyes
Were fixed, unbreakable. The ants
Were in the sockets, feasting, and
The pigeon perched upon its usurped throne.

*Old Lady Jeans*Sandra Shorey

Hey, you -

Yes, you with the smirk -

What are you laughing at?

These old jeans I'm wearing?

These "old lady" jeans?

High on the hips and narrow at the hem?

Let me tell you something -

Those new jeans you're wearing?

Those low-riding, hip-hugging,

Wide-bottom jeans?

Ain't nothing new.

My friends and I made that look

(Well, and thousands of other girls

Just like us. . . .)

We wore them lower than you,

With wider flares -

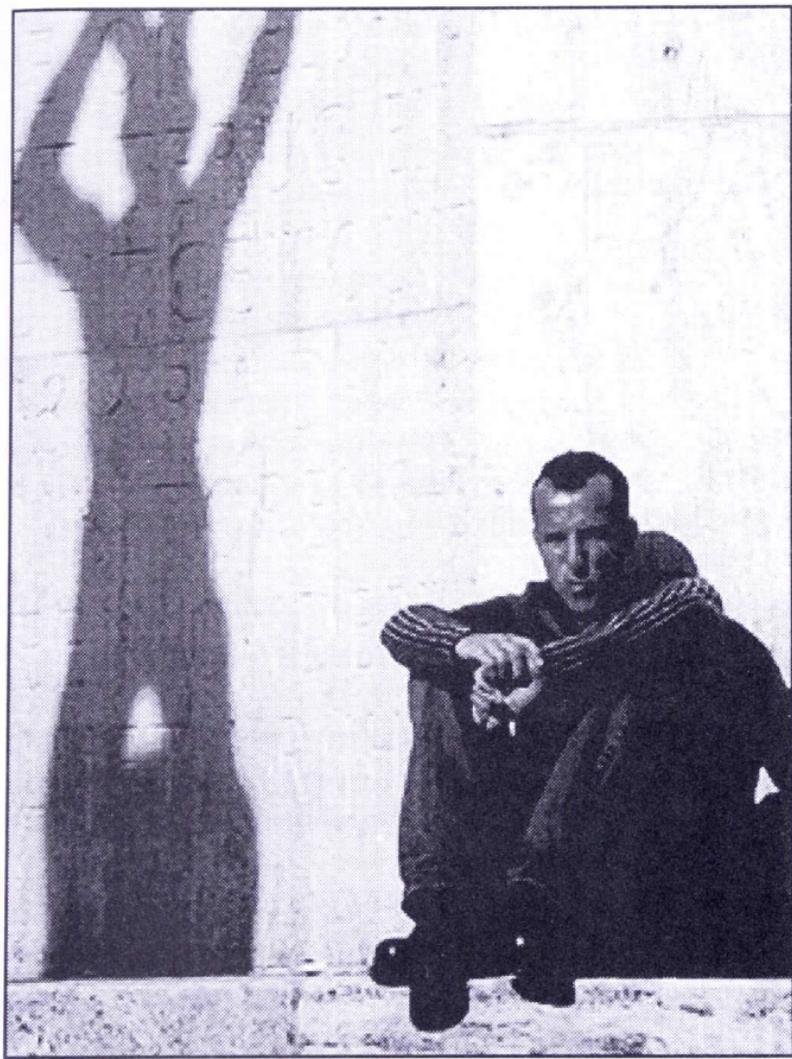
We called them “bell-bottoms.”

We stole the look from the sailors—
Bought ours at the Army-Navy Surplus.
Three inch fly,
Twenty-four inch flares and
Thirty-four inch length.
That was my style.

So why do I wear them,
These “old lady” jeans?
‘Cause I spent all my money
Buying those jeans for you.

Shadow of Doubt

Ed Grisamore



Mr. Telephone Man

Anthony Shelton

Communication in the Shelton household consisted mainly of a whole lot of yelling. Sisters yelling at brothers because we wouldn't come out of the bathroom soon enough. Mothers yelling at children about how dirty we had left the house. Children yelling at dogs for pooping on the kitchen floor right after we had mopped it. We yelled at each other on a consistent basis when anger ensued, of course, but we also yelled when we experienced a multitude of other emotions and circumstances.

Once, while I was watching an episode of *The Brady Bunch*, my mother yelled from the kitchen that our dinner, spaghetti and (insert meat product) was ready. She yelled in her loud, high-pitched voice that could shatter the glass in a soundproof room, "TONE, (short for Tony) CALL ERBODY IN TETE." Being the diligent son I was, I turned to the opened window and without removing my eyes and ears from what Alice was cooking in her own kitchen (pork chops and applesauce), I yelled out, "YAWL BETTER COME ON, MAMA SAID DAFOODSREDY." She promptly came into the living room/bedroom/ family room/ foyer and said, "HELL, BOY, I COULD'VE

DONE THAT MYSELF. GIT YO BUTT UP AND GO GET EM." As I walked to the front door I began to mumble. "Make me sick. Always yellin' at people." She, having returned to the kitchen, would yell out, "BOY, ARE YOU TALKIN' BACK TO ME?" To which I would give the door a hardy slam as I was leaving and blaming it on the sudden gust of wind upon my return. Considering the intensity in which our family corresponded with each other, I began to search for conversation that was a little less combative and a few octaves lower. Hmmm, the telephone!

As early as I can remember, which for me was sometime near the beginning of the seventies, we have always had a telephone. Ah, the seventies. The styles: Afros, bell-bottoms, dashikis. The politics: Black Panthers, unattained yet promised Civil Rights. The modes of communication: Western Union, the U.S. Postal Service and, good old Ma Bell. We might not have had service to it, but the phone was always an icon of communication in our house. When the bean counters at the billing offices of the phone company couldn't deal with our three months past due phone bill, the result was interrupted service. Upon these occasions, when the sweet soothing sounds of the dial tone were purged from our systems, we were forced to communicate with each other. Good luck. It was like having eight people living in the same house who spoke eight different languages. That stuff about sitting around the dinner table discussing our day with our parents was something we coveted from the Beaveresque television shows we viewed the previous night. Blessed be the name of whatever Thomas

Edison spilled that made him yell out, "WATSON, I NEED YOU." Guess he got tired of yelling too.

The telephone in my house was used for three things. Making and receiving calls related to finding a job. Receiving calls from teachers (for which I camped around many a night in hopes of answering before my mother did. I wasn't always successful). The third, and my favorite, calling girls and friends. This was a problem because my mother would call while she was at work to check up on us, and we, or I should say I, was "ALWAYS TYING UP THE DAMN LINE." Over the phone that piercing voice was so penetrating I had to hold the receiver at least twelve inches away from my ear so as not to damage my eardrums. (Make me sick. Always yellin' at people.) So, as my mother was able to afford it, she improved our dilemma by getting the latest in telecommunications technology. Call waiting. Free to handle two lines at once, I was back to business. I would go to school and devote my entire day to getting the digits. I'd come home with a pocketful of telephone numbers, organize them and begin rappin' as soon as possible.

The rotary was the type of phone used in the Shelton dwelling. Round and round we go and if I rotated the wrong number, "DAMN." Back to the beginning, but it beat drawing pictures on the side of our cave, tapping out Morse code or going outside with a blanket and firewood to send smoke signals. After about ten minutes of dialing, fingers cramping, I was overjoyed when I heard that ring. Finally. I made contact. I was Neil Armstrong landing on the moon,

"One small step for me. One giant leap for my social life." It was much to my chagrin that upon almost every number I dialed I would hear, "Thanks for calling McDonalds may I help you?" or "This is the Family Clinic, how may I direct your call?" Mind you, the "Family Clinic" was a euphemism for the STD clinic in my neighborhood. After being told for the last time that there was no one there by the name of Hazel, I was a little miffed. The guy on the other end, frustrated beyond belief, left me with these kind words: "If you dial this *# number one more time, I'm going come to your *& @ house and put my foot so far in your *&%# that you won't be able to sit down for a &%#@—" Click. Thank goodness the inventors of caller ID held out a few years later to cash in on their bright idea. After hanging up, I'd call my best friend and compare fake number stories. Sure enough, we had been bamboozled by many of the same girls. Picture this, girls in the bathroom putting on make up, smoking, and plotting how they would embarrass nerds like us. "Girl, nasty Anthony had the nerve to ask me out; I think he needs to give the STD Clinic a call." Giggling all the while. My friend and I would laugh at how the other got tricked and try to make up some plan to get them back. We never did. We were just happy to be able to call someone and have the means by which to do so. Now, with advanced technology, this once coveted and privileged treasure is now but a shiny stone in a sea of too many.

One would have to be destitute, homeless, on their last leg and at the soup kitchen's back door rummaging through their trash to not

have a cellie. It's so commonplace nowadays. With all that technology has to offer today, who in today's society would think call waiting was a landmark discovery? In fact, communicating with others has gone far beyond what I could have dreamed. Just this morning, I was finally able to access my voice mail from my cell phone. After refusing to ask the Verizon Wireless customer service for help and thinking I'd get laughed at for asking for assistance to access my voice mail after three years, I opted to tackle this demon myself. I can see the clerk responding to my dilemma, "Even my ten year old knows how to get to her voice mail." I, of course, would be totally beleaguered. I wanted to retort, regress to the good old days when yelling did the trick, but all I could get out was, "You mean to tell me your ten year old has a voice mail?"

Voice mail, e-mail, text messaging, caller ID, and picture phones. This is what's served on the communications menu these days. We have capabilities far beyond those of mortal men. While I was in Saudi Arabia in September 2001, I was able to log on to a computer and send IM (instant messages) back and forth to my family faster than I could get access to a phone line. I would've preferred the personal touch of the telephone. Giving advice to my niece and nephew. Sighing to my wife's voice then yelling at her because she hadn't sent me a package in three weeks (a soldier has to have his packages). It's gotten to the point that we have allowed the creators of this technology to use us for their enrichment instead of us using it for our benefit.

So, I'm walking around campus when I notice something very strange. I see individuals standing in groups, talking, not with the people they are standing with, but to others on their cell phones. Hundreds of young people changing classes, switching to hands-free mode? Some had head harnesses, while others had earpieces that fit securely in the wearer's ear. I could have sworn I heard the sounds of mechanical gears shifting and grinding as they walked by me. I almost want to start singing the Transformers song as they pass, "Transformers, robots in disguise." Once, while working at an army hospital, I stepped outside for some fresh air. Coming towards me, I noticed a man who appeared to be speaking to me. He was looking in my direction. Mouth was moving. No one else around. He was talking to me, right? As he got closer he, while looking right at me, said, "What kind of bitch are you?" Instinctively switching to berserker mode, hump in my back, claws sharpened and drooling ready to tear into some man flesh, I respond with, "WHO IN THE HELL YOU TALKIN' TO?" Without missing a beat, he lifted his shirt. Expecting to see the pearl handles of a Glock or Smith and Wesson nine millimeter, in rare Neo-like style, I took a step back in preparation for the onslaught of bullets. I look in the direction he was pointing and realized he was directing my attention to his cell phone clipped to his belt.

Talking to people, whether it is face to face or through some telecommunication device, seems to be the thing of the past. Who wants to talk to people when major corporations have replaced the

human receptionists with the ever-resourceful automated telephone clerk? This is, for those who have refused to venture out on the information superhighway, the pleasant voice of a virtual person, usually a woman, that wishes to guide and "direct your call." The person you're calling always seems to be, according to virtu-girl, "either away from their desk or on the other line or just not going to talk to any of you annoying humans today." I am in awe as to how long we will put up with Ms. Robo-linguist. "If you want billing press one. If you want accounts press two. If you have made a mistake please hang up and say I am the stupidest fool alive to be waiting on a machine to tell me what to do next." I, in true Shelton form, begin yelling into the receiver, "I'VE BEEN WAITING ON THIS PHONE FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES AND NOBODY. . . . HEY, DO I HEAR LAUGHTER IN THE BACKGROUND?" I quickly clicked to another line and called for an appointment with the ear, nose and throat doctor. Surely I had busted my vocal cords in that last altercation. While massaging my throat, I hear a soft, sweet voice answer, "You've reached the office of Dr. Watson. Please press one if you wish to make an appointment, press two if—" to which I promptly hung the phone up and went to the kitchen in search of warm salt water. Mamma's remedy for an overexerted voice box. I wonder what she's doing?

After medicating myself and resting for a couple of hours, I called my mother who, after many years of yelling, has developed a significant hearing loss in her right ear or as she likes to call it, her phone

ear. Throughout the entire conversation I felt like that Verizon Wireless guy or the chimp that stood in for him saying, "Can you hear me now? Good!" And, of course, since she has a problem hearing, she believes everyone else has the same problem. In between the yelling and asking for confirmation of what was said last, I began to experience something I had not felt since I left my mother's home: comfort, peace and safety that only a mother can provide. I try to hold back the tears but they come nonetheless. "IS THAT YOU CRYING, TONE?" The more I heard that piercing voice, the more I blubbered, "NO, MAMMA. YOU KNOW I GOT ALLERGIES!" After a few minutes of reminiscing, we yelled our goodbyes and I sat back and reflected on how this could be. How could a 41-year-old man, retired from the military after twenty years of service, world traveler, adventurer, owner of land and property, and avid motorcycle aficionado, come to bawling at the sound of my mother's voice over the phone? I had just seen her three months earlier on a trip to St. Louis. I didn't react in this manner then. As I'm sitting there my wife walks in the door. "What's the problem? Why are you crying, dear?" I wipe the "allergy-induced" tears away and try to explain the flood of memories I had just experienced. As she speaks, I hear the soft, sweet and comforting voice that could soothe the fires of Hell, nothing like Mamma's.

either/or

Josh Becker

In the shadow of sleep and dream and death
where sweet asylum offers us a chance
to pause, however briefly, for breath
before returning to the routine dance
of work and rest, I come to understand
these burning times. Why else would we parade
the splinters of our narrow home and damn
those that live to see the long house remade,
if not for fear of some powerful hand?
Have we no more strength left in our own
to rip away the scrim, to subdue the noise
and see forever in a grain of sand?
or will we look away from the unknown?
If nothing else, at least there is a choice.

*Four Haiku*Joseph Francavilla

lilacs gone by June—
children playing streetbaseball
home by suppertime

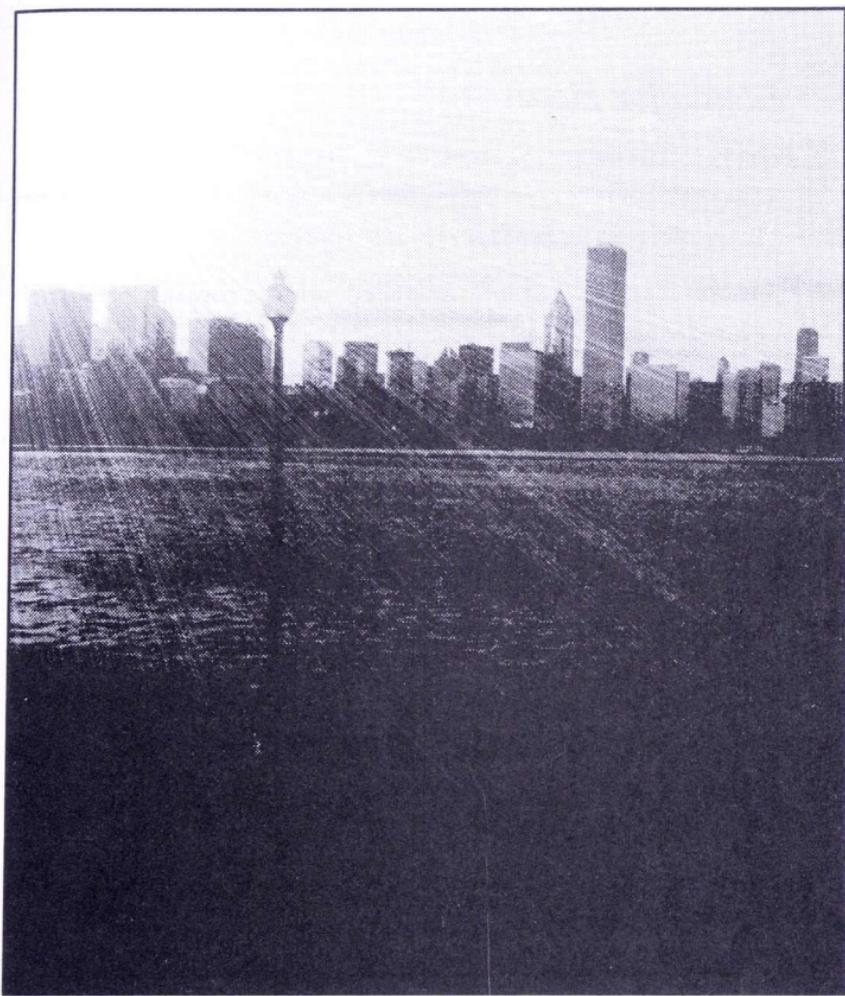
old man remembers:
on his playground swing long gone
head drops one last time

ex-lovers' chance meet
in their old-age home wheelchairs—
silent as fall winds

balding, snow-haired man
stares in the faded mirror—
where are the boy's curls?

Sunrise in Chicago

Kim Loupas



A Reason for Hope

Kathy L. Honea

Hope Summers and her mother pulled into the parking lot of the local Piggly Wiggly.

Please, God please don't let her do it again, Hope begged while struggling with the broken handle of the old Buick. She and her mother crept from the car and slowly walked toward the shopping carts.

"There's a good sale going on today." Her mother finally spoke.

"Momma, can I please sit in the car?" Hope asked, glaring at her mother's purse, the same old, black purse that she always brought to the market. For the past two years, out of Hope's nine years of life, she had dreaded trips shopping with her mother.

"Now, Hope, you know I need your help with the shopping."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm not feeling so good."

"You act like this every time we come here. Just quit whining, we won't be here too long."

Inside the market and passing the floral department, Hope admired all the flower arrangements, gift baskets, and colorful balloons. Seeing a vase with a single rose, her thoughts drifted to a field of roses snuggled in the wild. She envied the rose that was lucky enough

to be plucked from its bush and delicately placed, alone forever.

"Hope." Her mother's voice pierced her ears.

"Yes, Momma."

"Would you take this ham to the meat department and ask the butcher to cut it into thin slices?"

"Sure," Hope said eagerly. Taking all the time possible, she strolled slowly toward the man who was packing meat in the freezer. Her thoughts returned to her mother. *Maybe she won't do it this time. She's gotta stop one day . . . maybe it'll be today.*

She finally approached the short, stocky meat clerk. Glancing around to see if anyone was watching, she interrupted him.

"Excuse me."

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"W-Would you please cut this into thin slices?"

"Well sure. Wait here and I'll be right back."

Waiting by the freezer, Hope fidgeted with the frozen meats. She looked around and couldn't help but notice how busy the market was today. *Why are so many people here? Why can't they pick another day to go shopping?* After a few minutes had passed, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other as her patience slowly dwindled away. *I wonder what aisle Momma's on.*

"Here you go, little lady." The man smiled to her as he offered the wrapped meat. She accepted the meat, flashed him a half-smile, and then rushed to find her mother.

Where is she? Nervously, Hope searched through the aisles, one by one. Oh please be done shopping. Please, please, I want to get out of here.

Knots formed in Hope's stomach as she turned onto the Health and Beauty aisle. There stood her mother in her red plaid blouse and polyester pants. Her black slippers were worn with miles of walking and hard labor. She spent most of her days working at the Houston County sewing factory. She was looking through the deodorants when she glanced up and saw Hope standing there.

"Hey, there you are. I was beginning to think that you weren't coming back."

"I'm here, Momma." Sighing, she handed the package to her mother.

Hope walked behind, dragging her feet as if chains were tied around both ankles. Her heart pounded and sweat beaded around her brow and upper lip. She placed her sweaty palms inside her pockets while her eyes darted intensely from side to side to see if anyone was watching. Meanwhile, her mother calmly shopped for what seemed like hours to Hope. Hope moved like a robot, she couldn't relax, she couldn't speak; all she could do was look around to see that no one was watching. She continued behind in terror as her mom browsed through the perfumes, lotions, and deodorants.

Her heart sank when a voice echoed through the store, "Mr. Graves, assistance needed on aisle seven." Hope listened again to the voice repeat over the intercom. As she listened to the voice, she stared at the words on the labels of the perfumes and deodorants

until they burned her eyes, forcing a slight trace of tears. She held the tears back and placed her hands over her ears and tried to block out the noise around her. The sounds of her mother walking and breathing rang in her ears as the mixed aromas of powder and musk nauseated her. She began to sweat profusely and tugged at her mother.

"I want to go home, Momma."

"What is wrong with you?"

When Hope looked over her mother's shoulder, she noticed a man looking through the deodorants. He wore a white collared shirt with a black tie tucked neatly into his dress pants. His clean, stern face held a kind expression that almost stunned Hope, yet he frightened her. Each heavy step he took toward them stung her ears like a thousand wasps in full flight. She held her breath and wished him away.

With no concern, Hope's mother pushed her shopping cart and eased to the next aisle. Hope followed behind while trying to catch her breath. Taking deep breaths, Hope calmed herself and focused on exiting the store while her mom wheeled their cart into the check-out lane.

It'll be over soon, she convinced herself as she slowly trailed behind.

"Hope, take this cereal and these cookies back. I don't think I have enough money to pay for them."

"Oh, Momma, this is so embarrassing," Hope sneered.

Hope reluctantly took the items back to the shelves and returned to find her mother heading toward the exit. As she followed behind

her mother, a river of relief flooded her entire being. *Thank you, God, oh thank you!* She dashed through the door.

As fast as she could, Hope helped unload the groceries into the trunk. She then pushed the cart in the center of the parking lot and crawled into the car and shut the door. Inside the car, her mother placed the keys into the ignition and paused. She turned to her swollen purse and popped open the snaps. She then flipped the purse over onto the torn seat and exposed several items.

Hope's eyes widened and her heart raced once again, "Mom, let's go, please!"

Spraying a little dab of perfume on her wrist, her mother calmly glanced out of the smudged window and looked around. She then turned toward Hope.

"Can ya relax for a minute so I can try this on? It's a new fragrance."

Hope slumped down in the seat. She turned her head toward the window and looked into the clouded sky. All she could do was think of the single red rose.

*Fellow Colonial*Daniel Ross

For Seamus Heaney

No one invited them here either.
They did not even send us planters,
Lesser gentlemen, tainted aristocrats.
They loaded the settlement ships
With the dregs from London's debtor prisons.
Led by Oglethorpe, an Oxford man,
The ragtag mob made a home in Savannah.
They assumed the red man would move aside.
There was little pretence about God's greater glory,
Only an outright hunger for land and wealth.
They were the enlightened ones,
And they made King George proud of his namesake.

Sunset Beach

Terri Kimble



*Supper*Jake Patrick

The four of them rode to the restaurant together. Both kids, Scarlett and Parker, had been home since school let out for the day. Richard, their father, had arrived at his regular hour, a little later in the afternoon, craving a steak. When his wife Jacqueline showed up half an hour later than she usually did, he was perturbed.

“What took you so long?”

“I love you, too. We needed milk.” She put the white jug into the fridge and came back to the front room.

“Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“I want steak.”

“Oh, that sounds good.”

Scarlett, a confirmed but shy vegetarian, disagreed. “I’m not going.” “Fine, let’s go.” Richard was standing in the hall, his hand on the front door.

“No. Scarlett, you can get a salad. Where’s your brother?”

A door closed at the rear of the house. “I’m in the kitchen.”

“I’m not hungry, mom. I’m waiting on a phone call, I don’t want to

go."

Jacqueline was tired. She worked long hours as a file clerk in the basement of a hospital, and hated her job. "Look, you don't have a choice. You can talk on the phone any time."

Richard, still trying to be peremptory, stated, "Right. Let's go," and finally walked out the door, leaving it open behind him so the rest of the family could witness him start the car impatiently. Scarlett rolled her eyes, defeated, and silently went to sit in the back seat.

Jacqueline looked into the kitchen and called, "Parker! We're leaving. Come—" He shot through the passage, ducking his head as he passed her, and walked briskly to the waiting vehicle. She looked at him quizzically, but neverminded it as always, and locked the door behind her when she left the house last.

Richard pulled from the driveway too quickly, and Jacqueline admonished him with an irritated "Richard!" as she grabbed the overhead handle by the door's window. He sped to the end of the short street rebelliously, stopped sharply with a smirk, and then obeyed properly by driving at the speed limit.

Not long after that, with the radio turned off to appease everyone, Jacqueline began talking about a coworker whom Richard had met once at a dinner party that he was drunk at, and whom the kids had only heard of. None of them ever wanted to accompany her for the things she enjoyed—she liked to golf on the weekends and go downtown for live music or plays—so she often took coworkers with her, and had grown close to some of them in the process. Richard pre-

tended to be attentive, with an occasional "Uh-huh," "Right," or "I'm sorry, who said that?" He was an English teacher at a local high school, who wrote poetry in his spare time, which was constituted mostly by conversations with his wife. He was counting the syllables and stresses instead of listening for content in her words, and he would insert a stress to fill out an iamb or dactyl where she missed a beat: "No," "Sure," "Okay."

Scarlett took after her father. She was artistically inclined, played the clarinet in school and did well in a humanities course offered to High Achievers. She was still peevish over the required meal to come.

"You know, dad, meat will clog your colon. We should all eat more fruits and vegetables. The fiber is good for you, and there's plenty of protein to be found without gnawing on animals."

"Okay."

"I want my colon clogged," Parker offered contentiously. He was fourteen, and took after his mother more than his father. He'd not yet perfected the art of the come-back, and hadn't considered the ramifications of his statement.

Scarlett smirked at him with prescient triumph. She said, "Wow, the evidence is really building up. Is this the beginning of your deposition? Wait, let me get my pen." She went digging through her small purse.

"Shut up, you know what I meant. Queer."

"Yeah, I guess you can use that word with impunity now that you're

of the community." She was laughing at him.

He didn't know the definition of "impunity," but that was immaterial. He leaned over with his fist raised, middle knuckle protruding from the belligerent nest its family of digits formed, as though he meant to punch her thigh. She made a motion with her hand, of smoking an invisible cigarette with a mocking expression on her face, bobbling her head around with silly amnesty. He retreated, raising his middle finger entirely in an attempt to save face. When she turned to look out of her window on the driver's side, he sniffed his shirt, and decided it would indeed be best to keep a low profile. Parker was only two years younger than his sister, but that was enough to keep them apart in most respects. Different friends, different interests, different culinary ideologies; these were a few of the fissures in their sibling bonds. They hadn't been in a physical fight in a year, since he was in middle school, but that was partly due to the fact that they no longer saw one another much. This wasn't a chance of circumstance; it was both brother and sister's prerogative, having friends with vehicles who would grant either of them asylum away from home, which they gladly took advantage of.

They were approaching the turn that would lead them to the steak house, and Jacqueline stopped her expatiating to assist. "It's clear, Richard, this guy's going to let us over. No, wait!" The car in the next lane sped up, forcing the Suburban to jerk back into its lane. "Shit head."

"Asshole, watch out!" Richard blurted at the car through the wind-

shield.

"Okay, it really is clear now. I hate people like that."

Parker forgot his intentions, and joined his folks. "Mutha fucka!"

"Watch your mouth," Richard and Jacqueline both idly scolded.

Parker was smiling, and looked to share his puckish joy with Scarlett, but she'd momentarily renounced her family by staring out the window, considering herself a transcendental prisoner.

They parked in front of the restaurant. It was of a nameless corporate chain that advertised itself as a throwback to rough-and-tumble honky-tonks, offering the novelty of throwing peanut shells on the floor to soak up beer and blood, but most of its patrons were quiet suburbanites and high-school prom types. A taciturn hostess led them to a booth, where Parker was intent on heckling Scarlett over whichever seat she happened to choose.

"God, just sit where ever you want, and then I'll sit down."

He sat, and so did she, but then he changed his mind. She fixed him with a cold stare, but switched seats anyhow, half pretending to be irritated this time, as he was on the inside of the booth, a sheltered and clandestine corner she preferred. He forced a laugh at her, knowing all along she would want that seat, before eating a peanut from a small metal bucket in the middle of the table. Sitting on the edge of the banquette, he flicked his shells barbarously across the walkway between their table and a smoking-section partition that only stopped bodies from crossing, not peanut shells or smoke.

Jacqueline ducked lower to the table, and leaned across it to spit a

harsh and susurrant rebuke through partially clenched teeth. "Parker! Stop it, now! You're going to get us kicked out!"

Kowtowing to her tone, he tried a meek defense. "Mom, there isn't even anybody sitting right there." He knew he'd lost before it began, but a fight, he figured, was warranted, since his defense was basically sound.

"I don't care. Stop, now."

He rolled his whole body back into the booth from its angled position of attack, discomfited, looking childishly impudent. Jacqueline and Scarlett started cracking and peeling peanuts out. Richard was only ever pleased with the food of that establishment he'd come to know so well, and not with its pretentious decor, so he wasn't afraid when, sympathizing with his son, he took a handful of peanuts and gently tossed them into the smoking section without eating any. His face barely betrayed that he was satisfied with himself, while Jacqueline hooked her tongue between her upper teeth and cheek, raising an eyebrow. She'd known he would do something like that—he did every time—and was glad no one saw it this time. Some smoke did waft to them, from some untargeted portion of that other section. Richard was the first to notice it.

"God," he said longingly. "I should be over there."

"Go ahead. If you start smoking again, I'm moving to an apartment. Kids, you can come with me if you want." They were looking at their parents with slack-jawed boredom. This wasn't the first instance of such dull badinage, and by now they each refused to feign

amusement. Richard and Jacqueline weren't offended. They bored themselves, and were savvy enough to forgive their children's disinterest.

"Then I'll be right back, I'm going to the store."

"I hate you."

She decided she didn't feel like saying a word to any of them. Scarlett buried herself into the corner of the booth and blocked her view of the family with an opened menu. The others ignored the general tension by silently rifling through their menus too, when their waitress approached the table.

She was a young woman, somewhere in her twenties. She also had a slight lisp. This, coupled with her blue eyes, blonde hair, and slightly pudgy features, made her uncomfortably cute. Her personality didn't help.

"Hi, guyth! My name ith Krithy, and I'll be your waitreth." The poor girl. She was beaming, making eye contact with everyone but Scarlett, who stayed hidden. "Can I thart you off with thomething to drink? A Coke, thome wine, perhapth a frothy beer?" The smile was believable, which made it all the more painful. She had her hand resting congenially on the seatback behind Parker, and waited excitedly for a response.

"Uh, yeah," said Richard. "I'll have a 'frothy' Heineken."

Everyone else ordered their drinks with straight faces: Jacqueline, wine; Parker, sweet tea; Scarlett, water.

"Thuper! I'll give you guyth a couple of minuteth to look over the

menuth while I put in your drink orderth and bring out thome thteaming hot rollth." She bounced a little. Her eyes twinkled, inducing the most minute emetic effect on the collective conscious of the world's inhabitants, particularly this family's piece of it. She finally left.

The family resumed their perusals of their menus quietly, independently deciding their respective culinary paths. Generally, they were content to live and make up their minds without input from the other three, and so they sat, blocking out the noises of sports programs on TVs hanging from corners.

Still looking into his menu, Parker noted, "She sure was perky." No one responded, except to impassively nod their heads in agreement, and the remark seemed as though it would pass. He continued. "Bitch."

His family chuckled, and each turned up to find him grinning the same grin as in the car. They finished deciding upon their meals with tiny smiles, and Krissy returned. She placed their drinks on the table, along with a small wicker basket of sour dough rolls. She placed both hands on her hips with a shrug of satisfaction, as though she hadn't been there six hours already.

"All right, guyth, let me tell you about our thpecialth real quick. We have a chicken dish with wild rithe, grilled pineapple, and grilled pepperth, with a thweet thauce, and your choithe of a houthe or thaeser thalad. Our catch of the day, which ith thalmon, altho cometh with a vegetable medley and mashed potatoeth, ath well ath a houthe or

thaeser thalad." She settled readily into her practiced smile.

The family was incredulously wide-eyed and paralyzed, staring at her. None of them immediately spoke to it.

Jacqueline finally did. "I'm sorry," she smiled, "what was the first special?"

Krissy turned back on. "The firtht thpecial wath the chicken dish with wild rithe, grilled pineapple, and grilled pepperth, with a thweet thauce, and your choithe of a houthe or thaeser thalad."

"I'll have that. Could you tell me, what salad dressings are available?"

"We have Thouthand Island, Ranch, Ranch Lite, Honey Muthtard, an Italian vinaigrette, and a thpecial houthe drething." She was nodding in agreement with herself; they did indeed offer all of those dressings, Krissy.

Jacqueline coughed down a giggle. "I'll, ahem, I'll have the 'special house dressing,' then. Thanks."

"The houthe drething it ith, then. No problem." She wrote the order on a notepad, and then she took the rest of the family's orders: Richard, steak; Parker, hamburger; Scarlett, a salad. When she went away, they all looked at each from their opposing corners and spread their faces out in elated, silent laughs.

Scarlett looked over her shoulder to be sure no one else was in earshot. "I wonder if we can get her to say 'photosynthesis,'" she prompted. Each tried to keep his or her mouth tight and to hide his or her face with hands, but ultimately didn't want to prevent the fam-

ily's coalescing into one unified, riotous gut laugh. They chuckled with their heads bowed, gleefully glancing at one another, supporting the collective mirth for at least thirty seconds with such glances. Once they settled, they sat quietly considering the other patrons. Occasionally one of them would say something sibilant, milking the comedy that was their waitress for all it was worth, and they would all smile some. Another family was dining at a booth that was catty-cornered to their own. The father of that family was eating buffalo chicken wings ravenously, taking an entire wing into his mouth before chomping down and twisting his head left and right, drawing the bone out between two fingers as he did. It was reminiscent of some cartoon character flensing the meat of a fish in one mouthful, leaving only the musical tines of a ribcage to be plucked. Richard pantomimed the act, exaggerating it by poking his jaw out, prognathous-like, jerking his head too much, and pretending to use his invisible, naked chicken bones as drum sticks on the table. They all laughed at this, peeking around to see the real beast across the restaurant, prolonging their fits. Jacqueline said something about her husband's imitation being easy to come by, and he accepted it in good spirits, as she'd intended him to. A few minutes went by in this manner, when Krissy brought small appetizer salads for Richard and Jacqueline.

"All right, guyth, here you go." She was careful and respectful in leaning across the table to place both bowls down. She looked at Parker and Scarlett both, telling them "Your mealth will be out thoon, m'kay?" Then, to the whole family, "Again, my name ith Krithy, tho

pleathe jutht let me know if you need anything." She smiled and went away.

They situated things on the table, moving drinks and the bread basket and peanut bucket. They realized there was no silverware.

Jacqueline and Richard let their arms flop into their laps impatiently, unified in their momentary distress.

Scarlett said, "How about some forks, dummy." To the woman's credit, she soon recognized and remedied her mistake, and kept their drinks filled until the entrees were served.

They ate this food without the burden of conversation. Supper at home was usually eaten in front of a television or computer screen. "Proper" meals were eaten a few times a year, on holidays, when more distant family members were invited over and pretended to be nuclear before leaving for another five months. Otherwise, the dining table was littered with mail, laundry, various gewgaws that didn't know how to fit in yet, or whatever else, and prandial speech was kept to a minimum. Now, between bites, some of their attention was afforded one of the TVs in view over the bar, even if none of them cared about hockey. Scarlett couldn't help noticing the rare t-bone on her father's plate, and blanched at it more than once. Finally she pushed her salad away from her, put her utensils and napkin on the table next to it, and folded her arms in disgust. Richard looked up, plain-faced and irked, letting his fork hang loosely between two fingers, with both palms turned upward, pretending to supplicate his daughter.

"Cut it out, both of you." Jacqueline had been enjoying her food until that moment. "Just stop it."

Richard went back to eating, and Scarlett drank her water, waiting to leave. Neither of them looked at the other if they could help it. Parker, always feeling unnoticed and therefore enticed, took it upon himself to stab a pre-cut cube of Richard's steak with his knife, popping it into his mouth, just inches away from Scarlett's face, chewing with an open mouth. She let out a sigh of hot air in detest, and pushed his chest away from her. He smiled, still chewing the pink meat. Jacqueline shook her head, and she quit her meal as well, determined to call for the bill when Krissy came by again.

When she did, the waitress offered them a verbose and lispy catalogue of desserts. Rather than look to the other three members of his or her family, all four decided no, they did not want dessert, and each looked at Krissy at the same time to tell her so, as though she were the only object at the table they recognized, the one obscure and tortured familial nexus amongst them.

"Nope."

"No, thank you."

"I don't."

"No."

Krissy, chipper as ever, but beginning to look tired, replied to that assertion with another. "Okay, then. I'll bring your check thrraight away." She was still smiling, but the bounce had left her step, and she strode with the slightest hint of determination and fixity that comes

with working at a job because you need the money, and living a life you loathe because you feel you're destined for more. She herself wanted a husband and children.

Richard paid the bill, and the four sat looking out from their booth at other patrons, families at other tables, TV screens, a fly, before their waitress came back with the receipt and they were released. They left the restaurant in loose file, Parker hanging back at the door after the others had stepped out in the beginning rain, to swipe a handful of peppermints and toothpicks from the host's podium. A sliver of him felt victorious at letting his family stand in the rain just a few seconds longer, and then he joined them, and they all got in the car. Jacqueline didn't speak; no one spoke, really, so Richard, who was driving, found himself relying on the lonely, rhythmic sounds of the windshield wipers for his poetic musings. He'd figured out the final couplet of a sonnet, and wanted to get home before it mutated, and so he drove extra fast. Jacqueline didn't say anything about it, because all she wanted was to take a shower for too long, obfuscating herself in the steam. Scarlett was looking forward to escaping into a short story for class, hidden away in her room. Parker wanted to sign on to the internet and chat until three in the morning, managing six instant messages most of that time. Not one of them felt like speaking, and each felt that something said would melt like sugar into those gloomy spaces between the distant seats of the expansive Suburban, draining into the crevices and solidifying, dark and unwanted and sticky. They were contentedly fat, and warm, and dry, but quiet and

restless. As they were pulling into the short driveway of the house, Jacqueline did speak.

"Well, thanks Richard. That was good food."

"Yeah, thanks, dad," Parker consented.

Scarlett turned her head to the interior from looking down the stretch of street that seemed to run into a foreign, menacing unknown in the dark and drizzle. She said, "Yeah, thankth, dad. It wath thuper."

Richard told his family they were welcome, and they all grunted and chirped little laughs as they shook their heads, stepping from the vehicle. They went in through the front door of their home, and each went a separate way, under one roof.

“Seraphins”
Stephen Hawks



*Drunken Fragrance*Brandon Jones

Smoke emerges from my half
burned Romeo y Julieta,
slides up the edge
of my glass of whiskey,

slowly leaves me
and visits a couple sitting by my side,
lingers over their intimate conversation
and drops in on their gin and tonics,

suddenly stirs again and makes its way
to a group of women gyrating with the beat,
dancing among them, dipping
into their sloshing cosmopolitans,

then rushes over to a cocktail waitress,
floats about her as she swiftly moves from
table to table

and works its way into the tray of drinks,

a scotch on the rocks, two whiskey tonics,
a couple of beers,
stumbles onward

fumbles its way up the ceiling,
trips along with the thumping bass,
and reels out the open window
into the cold, clear night.

Watching the News: Pre-Op

Josh Becker

Through perseverance or madness I watch cable news.
Listening to the heads talking, I wonder
if I'll ever live to see the cure of folly.
I am drawn: the pounding soundtrack,
the martial cadence and Wagnerian flourishes.
Sound the trumpets, beat the drums, wave the bloody shirt!
Shading my sight from the colors and the light,
I see the anchors as they sink deeper still,
briny and dull from too much time on the waves.
I see gaps and holes and glaring omissions,
momentary lapses of mass distraction.
I see what Orwell was talking about.
I see Murdoch when Bosch's book closes on his head,
wailing, "Maser, cut out the stone!"
My name is Tricked Cuckolded Impertinent Hound."
Am I alone having forgone the operation for the stone?
Will I one day succumb, and, feeling the cold, metal gurney beneath,
look to see a fair and balanced Tyrant holding Ockham's Razor to my
temple?

Selfishness: The Myth of the Biological Imperative

Amber Floyd

My immediate family and I recently made the annual trek down to Green Cove Springs, Florida, for an orthodox family reunion. Throughout the afternoon we shared awkward embraces, generous libations, and my grandmother's celebrated hot-as-Hades chili con carne. As dusk descended, the menfolk settled on the front porch for gossip and cigarettes, while the ladies of the household appropriated the kitchen-cum-dining room for wine and conversation. My cousin's connubial bliss was the talk of the day, and we wasted no time in teasing her about the proverbial "baby in a carriage" she must be anticipating. Her quiet blushes and demurs soon turned the general focus to the only other child-less Singleton among the grandchildren: me, of course.

"How long does a 65-year-old woman have to wait for a great-grandbaby, young lady?" My grandmother inquired.

"Oh, I'm not having children, Grandma. I don't believe in spawning," I quipped.

There I found myself surrounded by a pack of voracious, Pro-creationist women—three generations of familial matriarchs comprised

of my maternal grandmother, mother, and cousins—who were all both shocked and appalled by my admission. How could anyone—any woman—not want to reproduce? My mother, who has always bemoaned her small clutch of only three children, seemed especially wounded by my revelation.

“Well, that’s pure selfishness,” she muttered.

I could not understand how my lifestyle choice could be deemed selfish. I am single and have no pre-existing children. Therefore, with no children to deny, who does this decision really hurt? Is it really selfish to know your own mind, to conscientiously abstain from contributing to our overwhelming population? I’m reminded of a comedian who said that if people were deer we wouldn’t have any qualms about thinning the herd. And yet, this myth of the biological imperative (A.K.A.: the biological *imposition*)—a belief that people are driven by a primordial instinct to reproduce—still prevails as a conventional wisdom and the subsequent bane of my existence.

I accept that there is a natural sex drive, a distinctly primal instinct to stimulate and gratify the loins, but the belief that a maternal or paternal instinct drives us to create something to mother or father seems excessive. Stephen Pinker, an evolutionary psychologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, believes that it is only after a baby is born that an instinct to care for the child kicks in. He argues “humans wouldn’t be such avid consumers of birth control if our genes were commanding us to reproduce.” My mother, however, is not so easily convinced.

After imbibing much familial commiseration and a healthy nightcap, my mother approached me to impart some words of wisdom. "You wait and see," she said, poking me in the chest with a determined finger. "When you find the One, you'll be surprised just how badly you want children then."

Apparently, my mother is an avid devotee of the romantic canon that states that children are the extension of love and, therefore, are a physical representation of that symbolic, romantic blending. Admittedly, I operate under my own set of romantic ideals, and I don't think my mother is entirely wrong, *per se*. After all, it is a beautiful philosophy. However, is it a reason to reproduce? Wouldn't the addition of children to this soulful pair undermine the very dynamics that the act of pairing seeks to preserve? For some couples, the addition of children to the original pair creates a family unit, but for others it tears them apart, negating the romantic quality of the original pairing itself. The One soon becomes the one that got away. Considering the possible outcome, why then does the general public continue to romanticize the idea of procreation with the happy myth of the nuclear family?

James Richard Skemp III, a freelance technical writer who has explored the biological imperative in his work, believes that "as long as some part of something is, the thing exists." For Skemp, children are not only an extension of our genetic traits but of our ideas and ideals as well. In this way, they preserve our character and beliefs

until they can pass them along to their vessel-like offspring, who will continue this pattern into infinity. In this way, we achieve immortality. Perhaps this is the real impetus behind general Pro-creationist opposition to conscientious abstinence. By abstaining from breeding, I am not just denying my mother a second, surrogate motherhood as a grandparent; I am also limiting her immortality and breaking our matriarchal line.

It is not my intent to either pain or restrict my mother through my supposed selfishness, however, there is a farther-reaching issue at hand; I am not an army of one. Many contemporary men and women are choosing life—their own. We maintain that procreation is a choice, not an imperative. We choose to control and take responsibility for our actions and bodies. We choose to reach immortality through our own efforts and work, rather than those of our children. We choose, just as my family and friends have chosen, what we want to do with our lives. We are driven by what Oscar Wilde once described as, “a desire on the part of man for a nobler form of life, for a freer method and an opportunity of expression.” We have determined the root of our happiness and have driven ourselves toward that end.

My mother found her happiness in her family and her children. I have found my happiness in independence and intellectual pursuits. Neither choice is unworthy, wrong, nor selfish. “Selfishness,” Wilde reminds us, “is not living as one wishes to live, it us asking others to live as one wishes to live.”

The Act, in Execution, was Beautiful

Brian B. Johnson

The swift fall of the group's mood around him
Was abrasive, and sudden, and perfect,
With jealousy rising inside them.

His resignation had caught them off guard,
And opened their minds to the wonder,
The chancing life that now he would lead.

His simple sentence echoed through the air,
"I thank you all for the years I have lost."
And all their brows were lined, and though

They felt no anger towards him,
Envy was in every face that he saw
And he felt their hopelessness around him.

The fear he had felt, he'd forgotten,
Now he was a marvel, one with courage,
And with no plans for the future, he was free.

*Villanelle of a Plea for a Choice*Kevin Ramirez

He reached for her, her arms of air,
Her lips of rose, her eyes of light.
And his eyes met her frozen stare.

Although she was his lady fair,
Her heart belonged to sightless Night.
He reached for her, her arms of air.

She loves him, but she'll leave Night ne'er.
To win her, to the death he'll fight.
And his eyes met her frozen stare.

He dreams of her, such beauty rare.
Her image in his heart stays white.
He reached for her, her arms of air.

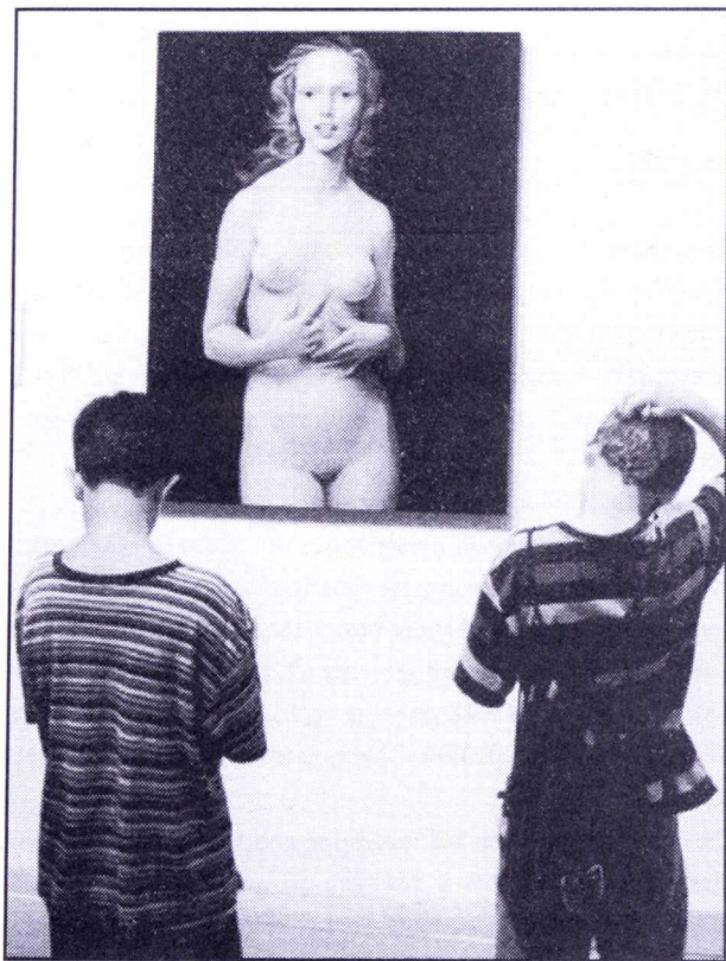
As light as breath, as soft as prayer,
He flies to her on windless flight.

And his eyes met her frozen stare.

Her love will lessen his despair,
Although her heart belongs to Night.
He reached for her, her arms of air,
And his eyes met her frozen stare.

Since Eve

Ed Grisamore



Letter from the Editor

Jake Patrick

Unexpected difficulties. I picked up that phrase somewhere this semester, in some kind of organic process of stress and pain, and I've kept it in my pocket. The regularity of blind-sides can be reassuring, in an odd way. Long periods of any stagnant emotion are detrimental to progress, and after a while a kick in the nuts is just what you need to get some go.

I've only become a good student in the past year or so. After many semesters of wandering aimlessly about the realm of academia, many months of musing on life and its vicissitudes, I've finally come to an awareness of myself. And there have been other trials, of love and loss and strain. That's called growing up, and the inclement sense of obligation that comes with growing up has made the important things swell and the bullshit shallow. Unexpected difficulties have become good friends.

The co-editor position fell into mine and Kathy Honea's hands at the last, irritating, annoying, piss-you-off-because-you've-got-other-deadlines moment, and we have worked diligently to assemble a team to produce this final product. Our appreciation for good literature and good art, and our desire to produce a quality edition of *Arden* this

year has been a weird salve on my mind; a last-minute, painfully sandpapered salve of motivation. The unexpected difficulties have always been there, and they won't stop coming. But so has the work, and the love, and the passion. To all of the editors, to our mentors, and to you, yeah you, whoever you are who picked this up for free and bothered to read it anyhow: thank you. Your contributions are invaluable.

Letter from the Editor

Kathy L. Honea

I would like to thank each artist for sharing a piece of their heart and soul and who, by submitting your work, allow us to continue giving a place for CSU students to express their creativity.

I personally want to thank Larry Kees for his ongoing support in making the Arden successful. Words cannot express our gratitude for your support and encouragement. Also, I want to thank Dr. Nick Norwood and Crystal Woods for their support and encouragement throughout the year. We couldn't have asked for better advisors! And last, but certainly not least, a big thanks to all the editors who bit the bullet and really pulled through to make this one of the best issues yet! I know how tough it was, but you all proved yourselves the best of the best.

Lastly, congratulations to all who have been selected for publication. It was extremely tough to sort through the many talented artists who submitted their work. For those who did not make it this time, please continue to work hard and not give up.

Arden is published annually with funding by the Student Activities Committee. Selections for publication are made in the winter of every year by a staff composed of CSU students and led by two faculty advisors.

All submissions are judged “blindly,” without regard to name, race, or gender. None of the editors know whose work they are considering before a final decision is made.

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